Coping with Covid19-based Disruptions in Educational Institutions

C Praveen

ABSTRACT

In developed countries like the US, there are agencies to tackle disasters which minimize disruption and ensure continuity of the learning environments such as the Campus Resilience (CR) Program. The absence of such agencies in India has evoked a sense of urgency in institutions of learning and many are now struggling to cope with ways of addressing the disruption of academic activities owing to the Covid19 pandemic. The disruption in delivery of instruction has prompted actions from the flagship of school and college education in India. The NCERT, for instance, is assiduously planning a social distancing-cum-individualistic teaching and assessment plan. The UGC has given directives to universities to commence new academic sessions only from September instead of June and explore online teaching. How will such changes in view of the Covid shutdown affect the functioning of educational institutions? How successful will plans for online instruction be, given the digital divide existing among institutions as well as students? This article reviews the current educational scene, which affects institutional leaders, teachers, and students and proposes ways of overcoming the current unprecedented state of affairs. A feasible plan of action is proposed which could be implemented by institutional leaders. The article concludes with the affirmation that all planning can succeed only through continuous monitoring and review.

Key words: Disruption in education; institutional leaders; Covid-19 pandemic; online teaching.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a disruption in academic activities creating a crisis involving teachers, learners, institutional leaders, and parents. Such unprecedented disruption of the regular functioning of educational institutions has made meticulous planning and coordination of the various systems imperative. A well-rounded and effective educational practice is what is needed now.

While there is talk in the air of attempts in institutions to replace the 'chalk and talk' mode with online learning, the digital divide and unfamiliarity with the new mode of instruction among teachers has become a major hurdle. What are the problems that have to be overcome? How can institutional leaders address the issue? This article attempts to answer such questions and proposes a step-by-step approach addressing the main stakeholders. It begins by proposing actions for those closely involved in the effective functioning of academic activities in educational institutions in the current situation. It is also hinted that prioritizing those aspects is essential for continuity of

activity in these institutions.

The effect on institutions

In *Times Higher Education*, Ellie Bothwell, in an article titled "Coronavirus: a 'make or break' moment for universities", has observed: "…Pandemic may tip some institutions 'over the edge' financially… Universities that fail to successfully transition to online education in the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic could be at risk of permanent closure…"

Prof. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University, speaking about the effect the epidemic is likely to have on university finances, has said: "…It really depends on the capability of the administration – can they get a good share of their instructors to move to an online platform?" (Quoted by Ellie Bothwell in the *Times Higher Education* article).

The effect on institutional leaders

The current crisis has definitely raised a number of questions, both ethical and moral. Everyone is looking forward to an educational leadership which is not just transformational but inspirational, too. We are in for a phase-by-phase application of decision making. The first phase will be one in which we directly confront the Covid19 crisis. In the next phase, there will be attempts to scale up online teaching and learning, and finally arrive at a stage where we draw on lessons from the first two phases and prepare for a learning culture where teaching online becomes a part of the core value of the institution of learning. Here, it is significant to note that many global organizations have pointed out that scaling up for online teaching

and learning is no small endeavour (ICDE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Researchers have also pointed out that leaders usually fail at the implementation stage of organizational transformation (Kotter, 2012).

The effect on teachers

Kamenetz (2020), discussing the factors related to teaching online during the coronavirus pandemic, makes a reference to the experience of the Faculty of Education at the University of Colorado, who describe their current teaching as "Panic-gogy" (from 'panic' and 'pedagogy'). She goes on to explain: "Panicgogy means understanding students' practicalities. Some only have smartphones. Some have family responsibilities. Some have been sent home and need to find a new place to live, a new job, and new health insurance and none are sure whether students will show up and take classes the same time every day." These incidentally are more or less universal issues and have relevance for the Indian educational scene, too.

Further, in many countries teachers are always underappreciated and disenchanted with their own profession. It is while possessing such an unhealthy frame of mind that the Covid crisis has suddenly begun to stretch educational systems to a breaking point. Everywhere teaching is moving online on an unprecedented scale. Naturally, there is a lurking fear, particularly among teachers, that learning will be replaced by inferior alternatives. So it becomes imperative to reflect on ways of mitigating such fears. Teachers have to explore meaningful ways of engaging the learners.

The effect on learners

Students, used to attending school or college where social skills are nurtured in face-to-face contacts, are now suddenly forced to meet and learn online. This is a drastic shift and so the time has come to find ways of engaging students online. Carlsson et al. (2015), who studied the effect of schooling on skills, found that a mere ten days of extra schooling significantly raises scores on tests of the use of knowledge (crystallized intelligence). So, the question that crosses the mind of educationists is whether a virtual learning environment (VLE) can be a good substitute for nurturing the skills.

Effect on home schooling vis-à-vis families

In their study, Bjorklund and Salvanes (2011) perceive the role of families as central to education as parents compliment the input from school and back in homes, learners actually continue their education. This then prompts us to ask the question whether online learning can compensate for the learning lost in school.

When we shift to full-time home schooling, according to Oreopoulos et al. (2006), factors such as the non-cognitive skills of parents, the resources available including good internet connectivity and the amount of knowledge can result in inequality of human capital growth for the affected cohorts.

Online learning as an alternative

The number of institutions of higher education taking the decision to move online is growing every day. Alexander (2020) has curated the status of hundreds of such institutions. Research has found that effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and development (Branch and Dousay, 2015). To make online education effective, an investment in an ecosystem of learner support becomes imperative and this takes time to identify and build. At the same time, online education is quick and inexpensive and, in the present crisis, will in every possibility be full-time 'residential' instruction.

This is a critical time and we need resources. The time has come to activate to optimum use the VLE in campuses with guarantee for technical assistance as a top priority. Perhaps at this stage it would only be appropriate to begin setting up an information processing facility. This should not only function regularly but must be accessible to everyone in the organization. Of course, security and privacy of information should be at the top of the agenda too.

To start with, training students, faculty, and staff to adapt to online teaching needs to be undertaken. This should go hand in hand with an introduction of learning management systems (LMS) and exploration of ways of exploiting the use of Open Source for digital learning, the adoption of mobile-based learning models, and the setting up of Campus Resilience initiatives. In short, the time has come to alter the current pedagogical methods and integrate seamlessly classroom learning with e-learning modes.

Advantages of online learning from an ELT perspective

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. The urge to communicate is likely

to make learners explore new ways of communicating. Not only would online discussions provide scope for polishing the ability to communicate, but also make possible the recording of such online discussions a handy document for future reference and pedagogic purposes.

Pedagogic challenges of online instruction

In their review, Redmond et al. (2018) found that online engagement can be categorized under five headings: emotional, social, collaborative, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. In planning for instruction, all these aspects have to be addressed.

1. For institutions

A full online course development project might take months to launch. But the urgency of the situation of somehow getting delivery online has every possibility of affecting quality. The practitioners know that an online platform is a great space for collaborative learning (e.g., discussion forum), but getting students to respond to the posts of peers is not easy. Learners have to be directed to post responses with strict word limit and use a tone that is not jingoistic but accommodative.

Experienced teachers know that web conferencing is always a preferred choice when the group of learners is small, say 30; the students can use their microphone or even chat. However, when the numbers are more, web conferencing becomes just another TV broadcast with little or no scope for interactive learning. Here, too, lack of good internet connectivity can be a big hassle. More importantly, compared to face-to-face instruction, online teaching may not be inclusive.

2. For teachers

Unlike face-to-face instruction, during online instruction the teacher will seldom know whether all the learners are really attentive. Then, posing questions at regular intervals, especially during an online lecture, becomes more of a necessity. More importantly, it takes time for a teacher to become an effective online teacher. Further, most online assessment employs multiple-choice questions. When learning outcomes include the ability to demonstrate a skill, the teacher would have to go in for performance-based assessment, which may involve submission of audio or video recordings by the learner as proof of their learning. Here the digital divide, which affects learners from low income groups, can affect learning and assessment.

3. For learners

Given the novelty of the mode of instruction, students who are quite talkative in the class may tend to be silent online. Further, learners are likely to feel lonely or not cared for, resulting in a sense of anxiety. This would then mean that plans for instruction by the teacher during the proposed online teaching should set up avenues for communication that make the learners feel that they are taken care of and are always connected.

Overcoming challenges through 'Best Practices' (BP)

'Best Practices' are methods or techniques generally accepted as superior to any other alternative. They often are "a set of guidelines or ideas that represent the most efficient or prudent course of action" (*Investopedia*). The

fact remains that, though a course of action is normally recommended, certain situations require choosing practices that most suit the specific context.

'Best Practices' in course design and delivery

CourseArc, a leading digital content authoring and management tool producers, have listed best practices for online course design. They include:

1. Beginning with a clear course syllabus/ content outline

2. Designing course content to suit the specific audience – millennial learners who are comfortable with succinct content with lots of videos and 'interactivities'

3. Delivering course content in manageable chunks

4. Utilizing design elements that make navigation for learners relatively easy

5. Ensuring content accessibility in addition to integration with assistive technology

While adopting such best practices, CourseArc cautions, it is equally important to design courses addressing learner needs and the intended audience by matching the specific learning outcomes.

'Best Practices' in teaching

Salcido and Cole (2018) identified best practices for teaching online. These include:

1. Ensuring instructor presence

2. Motivating learners to make real-world connections

3. Orienting students for online participation, communication, and etiquette

4. Providing clear expectations regarding due dates of assignments and assignment directions

5. Aligning content with course objectives and assessment

6. Feedback that not only checks learning but reinforces important concepts and skills

7. Engaging students by providing challenging and enriching educational experiences

'Best Practices' for learners

Canvas, a leading provider of online courses, has listed the following best practices for students taking online courses. Those which have immediate relevance for institutions planning to introduce online instruction include:

1. Schedule times several days a week to work on the course just like a face-to-face class.

2. Read the directions for completing assignments.

3. Communicate with the teacher on a weekly basis via email or by phone.

4. Ask questions so that the teacher will know that what is learned has been properly understood.

5. Try to stay organized by saving files in appropriate folders.

6. Complete the given assignments putting in the best work possible.

7. Maintain a copy of all the answers.

Plan of action

All planning should begin by identifying the problems and nature of support necessary for the staff, changes to be made in infrastructure, if any, and a critical review of assets essential for proper execution of business plans. The planning should be such that it helps coordinate all key functional teams. These have to be undertaken by the institutional leadership. And for this, a communication plan which helps coordinate the new set-up should be a top priority.

Tips for preparation to teach online

Jisc, the London-based agency which specializes in digital education and research, has provided a few practical tips to ensure continuity of learning during enforced absence. A few which are directly related to the focus of this article include:

1. Ask all teaching staff to ensure they can access and know the basics of how to use the VLE.

2. Ensure all teaching staff have access to support for using the VLE.

3. Ensure the accessibility of all content you provide to learners online.

4. Ensure your VLE is enabled to manage online assessment.

5. Support teaching staff to create robust, meaningful, and accessible online assessments.

6. Consider student wellbeing by paying particular attention to vulnerable students and what additional contact needs they may have, including the setting up of a help desk.

7. Connect with staff without forgetting that they also have their own needs and anxieties, which may overlap with those faced by your students, but which will require separate consideration and treatment.

8. Ensure that the staff are prepared for remote working and encourage them to make their home environment as conducive as possible to effective remote working.

9. Encourage a management culture which is built around trust, flexibility, and outputs, rather than one which leaves staff feeling the need to account for every minute of their working day.

10. A pragmatic approach to the introduction of online pedagogy in this time of unprecedented crisis would be to avoid the temptation to re-create the existing educational ecosystem. Instead, one should attempt to set up instructional support that is reliably available to the teacher and the learners during this Covid-related crisis.

11. Given the existing digital divide in many institutions, while implementing online pedagogy, teachers need to ensure that asynchronous activities receive precedence over synchronous ones. In addition, extension of time for assignment submissions has also to be considered.

12. The nature of the learning task, the

proposed degree of cognitive engagement of the learner, and the strategy employed by the teacher to assess the learning has to be carefully chalked out.

13. It is advisable to set a time schedule for learners to get in touch with the teacher for clarifying doubts when they are working most of the time offline.

14. Long-drawn-out lectures will have to be replaced by short summary type lectures.

15. Discussion forums lend scope for flexible participation. The teacher has to pose consciously questions related to the content taught which is at the same time related to the learning outcomes and assessment.

16. Learning with and from peers through collaborative effort is a feature of online learning. Providing tasks that prompt learners to share their understanding and engage in focused discussions for completion of a task will in every possibility result in meaningful learning.

17. The tendency to relish a sense of belonging and a strong sense of community will always be there among students. This would necessitate the teacher to get students to engage in online discussions on topics where all the members in the group feel that they are connected. Tweaking topics that interest learners and at the same time get them to say something that makes them feel connected is crucial.

18. Writing a general response at the end of all the discussions related to a question in the discussion forum which becomes a sort consolidation of all of the responses of the participants touching upon the main points by the teacher is essential and may require time and energy.

19. Preparing challenging distractors for multiple-choice questions is likely to be time consuming but is worth the challenge. At the same time, if the questions as such are very difficult, the learners are likely to lose interest in learning online.

The practical tips provided here may equally apply to teaching English in the Indian context with adaptations and enhancements, wherever applicable.

Summing up

There are plenty of resources available online but the scale of change to online learning is likely to stress the system that provides the resources. Further, teachers turning to online teaching for the first time are likely to utilize the online possibilities below the optimum level, but we need to recognize them for the efforts they put in and provide the necessary support to refine their online pedagogic strategies.

The current situation necessitates adoption of e-learning strategies, so it is important to establish benchmarks for the online learning mode. Those in leadership roles have to ensure that there are proper assessment parameters for the e-learning courses that teachers offer. Continuous review and monitoring, possibly with expert assistance, should become a regular feature.

The suggestions made in this article are not all-encompassing but are only meant for institutions and teachers to help with the critical planning phase. Let us realize the fact that what we are experiencing now is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode owing to the Covid- related crisis. Teachers, students, and managements of institutions are asked to do things never before attempted and the absence of a proper role model can not only affect quality but also create confusion. Nevertheless, we have to welcome creative ways of delivery modes and use of tools to match the needs and limitations of both teachers and learners coping without any prior training.

In conclusion, the advice of Dr. Miller, a digital learning professional with over 20 years' experience as an online and face-to-face instructor, on the rush to offer courses online is worth considering: "… there's a high probability of error but also a lot you can do to succeed. Problems may occur due to overtaxed technological infrastructure, your students' disorientation, and fear…the current crisis-driven educational opportunity is a call to action. The reputation and integrity of your institution—and you! —depends upon your offering *engaging* online classes."

References

Alexander, B. (2020). Coronavirus and higher education resources. March 9, 2020. Accessed on 8 May 2020 from https://bryanalexander.org/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-higher-education-resources/Blog.

Bjorklund, A. and K Salvanes. (2011). Education and family background: Mechanisms and policies. In E. Hanushek, S. Machin and L. Woessmann (eds), *Handbook of the economics of education,* Vol. 3.

Bothwell, E. (2020). Coronavirus: A 'make or break' moment for universities. March 19, 2020. Accessed on 03 May 2020 from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/coronavirus-could-be-make-or-break-universities-finances

Canvas. (2020). Best practices for students taking an online course. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://canvas.seattlecentral.edu/courses/858020/pages/best-practices-for-students-taking-an-online-course

Carlsson, M., G. B. Dahl, B. Öckert and D. Rooth (2015). The effect of schooling on cognitive skills. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 97(3): 533–547.

CourseArc. (2020). Best practices for online course design. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://www.coursearc.com/best-practices-for-online-course-design/.

ICDE (International Council of Open and Distance Learning. (2020). Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://www.icde.org/icde-blog/2020/3/30/open-online-and-distance-teaching-and-learning-during-the-corona-virus-pandemic-learningtogether-1.

Investopedia. Best practice. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/best_practices.asp

Jisc. (2020). Ensuring continuity of learning during enforced absence. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://www.jisc.ac.uk/

guides/ensuring-continuity-of-learning-during-enforced-absence

Kotter, J. (2012). *Leading change*. Harvard University Press.

Miller, J. A. (2020). Eight steps for a smoother transition to online teaching. Accessed on 08 May 2020 from https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/eight-steps-for-a-smoother-transition-to-online-teaching/.

Oreopoulos, P., M. Page and A. Stevens. (2006). Does human capital transfer from parent to child? The intergenerational effects of compulsory schooling, *Journal of Labor Economics*, 24(4): 729–760.

Redmond, P., Heffernan, A., Abawi, L., Brown, A., & Henderson, R. (2018). An online engagement framework for higher education. *Online Learning*, *22*(1),183–204. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1175 [CC-BY]

Robert M. B. and Tonia A. D. (2015). *Survey of Instructional Design Models*. Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT).

Salcide, A. and Cole, J. (2018). Best practices for teaching online. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from https://teachonline.asu.edu/2018/09/best-practices-for-teaching-online/.

UNESCO. Accessed on 09 May 2020 from: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.

Dr. Chandrasekharan Praveen, Principal-in-charge, Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Thrissur, Kerala.

Some useful web tools for speaking skills

Podcasting Tools

Podomatic (http://www.podomatic.com)

Spreaker (http://www.spreaker.com)

Audioboom (https://audioboom.com)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

[***Contributed by Dr. Xavier Pradeep Singh***, Dept of English, St Joseph's College, Trichy]